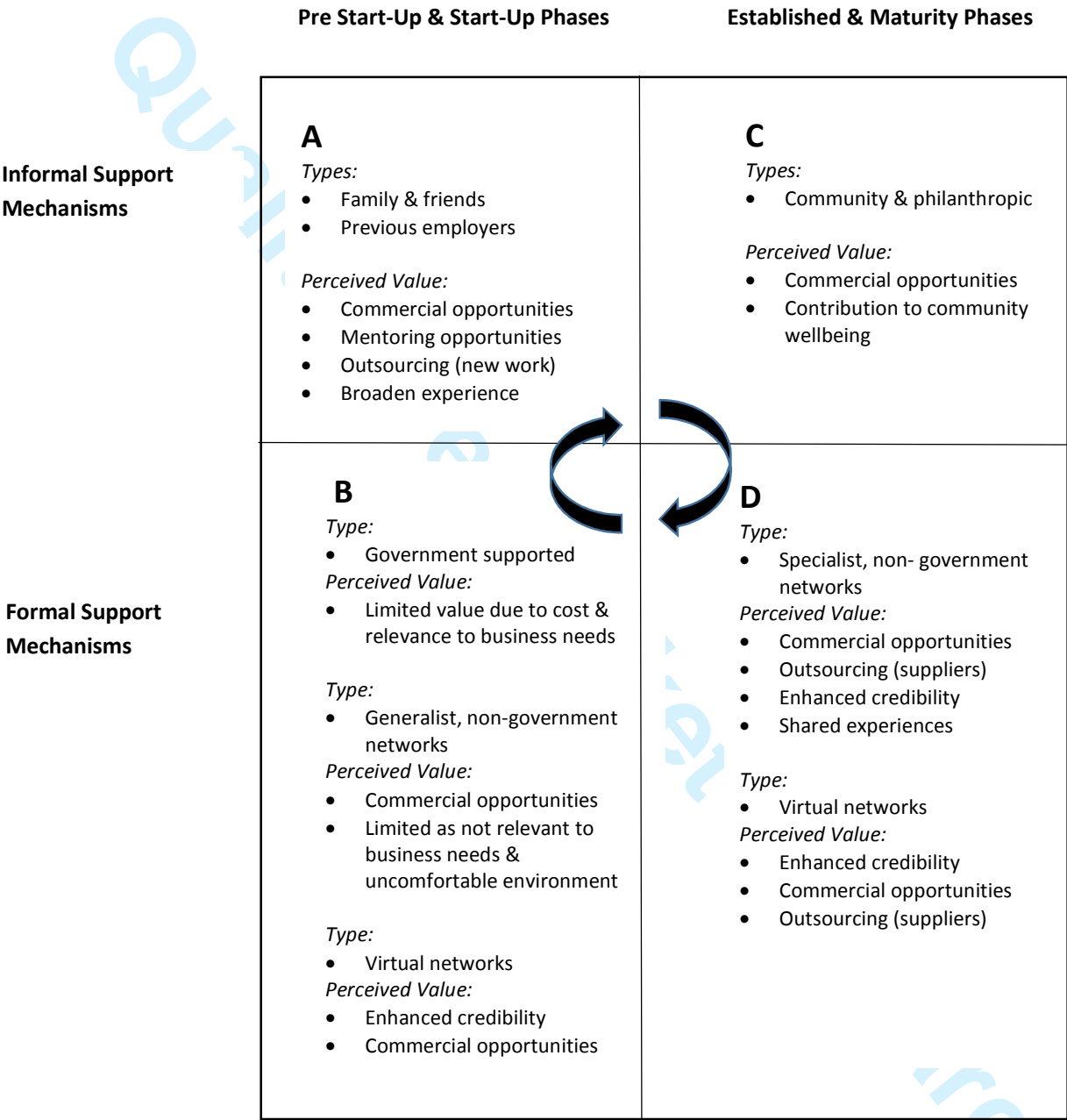




Female entrepreneurial networking in the marketing services sector

Item type	Article
Authors	Foster, Carley; Brindley, Clare
Citation	Foster, C. and Brindley, C. (2018) 'Female entrepreneurial networking in the marketing services sector', <i>Qualitative Market Research: an International Journal</i> , 21(2) DOI: 10.1108/QMR-11-2016-0106
DOI	10.1108/QMR-11-2016-0106
Publisher	Emerald
Journal	<i>Qualitative Market Research: an International Journal</i>
Downloaded	13-Jan-2019 02:42:34
Link to item	http://hdl.handle.net/10545/621947

Figure I: Support mechanisms used by women owned marketing services SMEs



SME	Location	Age of Business (yrs)	Service	Owner's Age	Approximate Annual Turnover (£)	No. of permanent staff (excl. owner)
1	Midlands	10	Marketing Communications	44	60k	1
2	Midlands	<1	Marketing Strategy	28	5k	0
3	Midlands	3	Market Research	37	15k	0
4	Midlands	2	Marketing Strategy	40	10k	0
5	Midlands	3	New Product Development	36	25k	0
6	Midlands	6	Customer Relationship Management	*	22k	0
7	Midlands	8	Digital Marketing	42	*	3
8	Midlands	1	Marketing Strategy	38	15k	0
9	Midlands	2	Customer Relationship Management	40	30k	0
10	Midlands	5	Marketing Strategy	44	20k	0
11	Midlands	6	Marketing Strategy	46	35k	0
12	Midlands	3	Marketing Strategy	36	30k	0
13	Midlands	1	Marketing Strategy	38	*	0
14	North West	3	Customer Relationship Management	39	22k	0
15	North West	3	Marketing Strategy	42	17k	0
16	North West	2	Marketing Strategy	36	*	0
17	North West	7	Marketing Strategy	34	32k	0
18	North West	1	Marketing Strategy	37	8k	0
19	North West	2	Marketing Communications	41	*	0
20	North West	3	Marketing Strategy	42	15k	0
21	Wales	2	Marketing Strategy	35	*	0
22	Wales	6	Digital Marketing	*	40k	0
23	Wales	<1	Marketing Strategy	30	8k	0
24	Wales	3	Marketing Strategy	35	20k	0
25	Wales	4	Marketing Communications	41	25k	0
26	Wales	4	Marketing Strategy	42	26k	0

*information not provided

Table 1: Profile of SMEs

Generic Theme	Sub Themes	Specific Themes	Example Extract
Informal Network	A.Family and Friends	A1. Mentoring A2. Business opportunities A2.1 Diversification/ new sector A3. Unpaid work	A2: "Through a friend, I got involved in working with self-employed creatives, training them in marketing"
	B.Local Community	B1. Unpaid work B2. Philanthropic work B3. Paid work B4. Wider business opportunities	B2: "I've been involved in charity work and I think you've got to keep a balance...I get worried about people who all they do is focus on the money side of things."

Table 2: Extract from coding template

Female entrepreneurial networking in the marketing services sector

Introduction

Networks are key for market development, as sources of supply and a catalyst for new venture creation and thus essential to entrepreneurial development (Jack, Moulton, Anderson and Drakopoulou Dodd, 2010). For this paper, networks are defined as the 'individuals an entrepreneur is in contact with for business-relevant purposes' (Sullivan and Marvel, 2011, p.189). As Greve and Salaff (2003) identified, the nature of the network varies depending on the life stage of the small and medium sized enterprise (SME). Furthermore, at a theoretical level, similarities can be drawn between the skills required to network and those used by SMEs and marketers, such as client relationship building and PR (Resnick, Cheng, Brindley and Foster, 2011). Morris, Schindehutte and LaForge (2002) argue that SMEs rely heavily on personal networks to support their business activity because they do not have the resources to engage in sophisticated marketing initiatives. For SMEs, marketing is therefore a creative entrepreneurial process (Yang and Gabrielsson, 2017) and one which is a 'social, personal activity and not only an organizational function' (Hills, Hultman and Miles, 2008, p. 104). This reflects Morris *et al.*'s (2002, p. 5) wider definition of entrepreneurial marketing, namely, "*the proactive identification and exploitation of opportunities for acquiring and retaining profitable customers through innovative approaches to risk management, resource leveraging and value creation*".

Studies have explored the nature of networking and the relationship it has with small firm marketing in a range of sectors (Gilmore, 2006). More generally, research has examined the interface between entrepreneurship and marketing in different sectoral contexts and examined the impact of different variables such as size and age of business on

entrepreneurial marketing (Yang and Gabrielsson, 2017; Kilenthong, Hultman and Hills, 2016; Crick and Crick, 2016). However, it is unclear how self-employed female *marketers* draw upon their professional skills in practice to network and market their business effectively. For those who have held corporate marketing roles before venturing into self-employment, it is also worth considering the extent to which the corporate entrepreneurial behaviour of these individuals is extrapolated to a SME marketing services context. Evidence suggests, for example, that marketers move into self-employment after gaining experience in a corporate role first (Foster and Brindley, 2010). Female marketers are of interest here, since although the marketing profession is feminised (Wheatley, Foster and Brindley, 2011) and skills such as relationship building can be associated with feminine traits (Martinez and Aldrich, 2011), little is known about the self-employment experiences of women providing marketing services. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to understand how self-employed women who have their own marketing services businesses, build, use and value networks over the life-cycle of their business. Rather than considering networks and support at one stage of the business lifecycle, the study draws upon the 'life-span perspective of the entrepreneur' (Foss, 2010, 96) by encouraging the participants to recount their experiences of support over the duration of their business. At a more general level, the study, therefore, attempts to explore the gender/marketing/entrepreneurship interface and thus contributes to the entrepreneurial marketing literature.

The paper adopts the view that women are not a homogenous group by moving away from a comparison with men and focussing on the different intra-group experiences of women (Ahl, 2006). The study, therefore, addresses the concerns expressed by Brush, de Bruin and Welter (2009) and Cohoon, Wadhwa and Mitchell (2010, p.1) who point to women

entrepreneurs being an understudied group and that ‘...our ignorance of this important demographic is a serious blind spot in any effort to increase the total number of entrepreneurs.’ Moreover, by adopting a qualitative in-depth approach, this study makes a methodological contribution by enabling the women to voice their own experiences and construct for themselves what entrepreneurship means to them and how they identify/perceive networks, a perspective that for Foss (2010) has been largely absent in network scholarship. The study concentrates on one area, that is marketing services, within the tertiary sector, which along with the primary and secondary sectors, constitute the three sectors of the private economy (Maroto-Sanchez, 2012). This means that industry variables which may influence the experiences of these women are kept to a minimum. It also provides an opportunity for the study to capture experiences from a service sector that is feminised (Korczynski, 2002). The focus on marketing services, therefore, adds depth and rigour to the study as it enables the exploration of how a specific sectoral context might affect women’s self-employment (Beetles and Harris, 2005). This focus also provides the opportunity to investigate the extent to which, the skills the women use to network for their own business, share similarities with the skills associated with marketing activity and their entrepreneurial skills used in previous corporate marketing roles (Gilmore, Carson and Grant, 2001a). The study also has practical implications. By exploring the real-life experiences of self-employed women marketers over the life-span of their business, policy developments can be tailored more effectively towards women’s self-employment needs.

The paper begins by discussing the theoretical framework of the study by exploring the notions of networks and women’s self-employment, in addition to the marketing services sector context. The approach to primary data collection is then explained, followed by a

discussion of the findings. Finally, a model is proposed that encapsulates the support mechanisms self-employed women build, use and value over the life-span of their marketing businesses.

Literature Review

To start, grow and sustain a business, an entrepreneur’s propensity to develop and maintain networks is an important part of the entrepreneurial process (Jack *et al.*, 2010). The gathering together of the necessary resources at different times of the business life-cycle (Birley, 1985), has often led to the view that without a particular set of resources the business is deficient. It has been suggested that network ties, namely ‘...persons with whom the entrepreneur has a relationship and that are helpful to the entrepreneur...’ can help to lessen the knowledge and resource deficiencies an SME might have (Sullivan and Marvel, 2011, p. 189). These ties can be both strong and weak depending upon, for example, closeness of the relationship (Granovetter, 1973; Jack, 2005). Other strands of literature have focussed on how many actors make up a business’s network and studies such as Birley (1985), have adopted a quantitative methodology and addressed questions such as whether the network has dyadic or multiple network ties (Larson, 1992). A further strand has focussed on how networks evolve over time (Greve and Salaff, 2003; Jack *et al.*, 2010) and although this has an evolutionary viewpoint, emphasising elements such as access to social capital (Renzulli, Aldrich and Moody, 2000), it links back to resource capability at different stages of the business life-cycle. One aspect of resource capability has been explored by Orser and Elliott (2015, p. 5) who have proposed a continuum of gender influence on venture creation. This ranges from ‘no gender influence’ to ‘gender awareness’ (where gender differences exist but do not influence actions or decisions), through to ‘gendered

process' (where being female enhances or impedes SME performance). Similarly, when gender is introduced as an explanatory variable in network research, some research has added to the 'women as deficient' agenda, whilst other studies have not identified any significant differences between genders (Cohoon *et al.*, 2010). Studies suggest that entrepreneurs use networks in a strategic manner, women are disadvantaged compared to men, weak ties lead to men's success, strong ties hold women back (Granovetter, 1973). Others propose that women are inherently relational (Martinez and Aldrich, 2011), arguing that '...entrepreneurial networking is particularly important for women' because women's self-worth '...is shaped by a sense of connection to others' (Klyver and Grant, 2010, p. 213). These hegemonies identify a blind spot though in research on women and networks that is exacerbated by the masculine construction of entrepreneurship and constructs that see an entrepreneur as a 'hero' (Wilson and Tagg, 2010). Indeed Foss (2010, p.88) argues that network research is based upon 'hegemonic voices' which can limit the discourse associated with gender and entrepreneurial support.

A further dimension is that existing industry experience and the ties that surround women at start-up, influence both what type of business is set-up, its location and the long-term viability of the business. Loscocco and Bird (2012, p.210) argue that it is 'vitally important to analyse the social interaction processes through which women make (constrained) choices about what kind of businesses to start, where to locate them and how much time to give them....'. Sectoral choice is often determined by educational background (Sharafizad, 2011) and is further limited when educational attainment translates into whether someone has a professional or non-professional career. Self-employed women in professional sectors are 'less likely to view paid work as highly central' although home-based self-employed

professional women reap more economic benefit from those in non-professional sectors (Loscocco and Bird 2012, p.208). These situational impacts thus exert an influence on network choice and their usage (Foss, 2010; Sharafizad, 2011). As Foss (2010, p.93) posits ‘networking is not a detached activity, unaffected by place and time,’ rather gender ‘shapes –patterns of social interaction’ (Hanson and Blake, 2009, p.137). Where we live and work therefore, determines who we know and who we speak to.

Previous works have emphasised the criticality of networks to start-ups: ‘....it is difficult to see how venture creation is possible without access to an effective set of network relationships’ (Drakopoulou Dodd and Patra, 2002, p.117). However, in a similar fashion to sectoral choice, women’s divergent roles mean that ‘... the excessive amount of time spent on network maintenance and development must surely carry considerable opportunity cost’ (Drakopoulou Dodd and Patra, 2002, p.130). A cost which may account for Audet, Berger-Douce and St-Jean’s (2007) conclusion that women are sceptical about networks and thus use them less, although this may be related to other considerations such as perceived usefulness. Indeed, Audet *et al.* (2007, p.554) found some evidence to suggest that ‘excessive networking (more than three times a year) might be counter-productive’. However, another explanation is proffered by McGregor and Tweed (2002, p.430) whose study found that networked female businesses are smaller and home-based ‘...suggesting that informal support, rather than institutionalized linkages’ are more relevant.

Moving away from start-up, it is pertinent to examine how women develop and interact with networks from a longitudinal perspective. There has been a call for further research which explores the fluidity of women’s networks over time (Klyver and Grant, 2010).

Alakaleek, Cooper and Bock (2014) identified 3 types of networks: personal, business and clients. Each of these networks play a different role at different stages of the business life-cycle. Munch, Miller McPherson and Smith-Lovin (1997), for example, argued that because of childrearing responsibilities, women will typically rearrange their network composition to favour kin over other contacts. This preference for family support may lessen as children become older, supporting the idea that networks are not static.

As Maclaren and Catterall (2000) argue, knowledge of women working in professions like medicine, teaching and banking is evident, yet the experience of women working in professions like marketing is largely anecdotal. Investigating the support mechanisms used by SMEs in the professional services sector, therefore, is of interest as the success of these enterprises is largely dependent upon the reputation of the business and thus, the use of networks (Neergaard, Shaw and Carter, 2005). Furthermore, the SME service sector is largely populated by women owned businesses and a high proportion of these are in marketing and allied professions, and as Brindley *et al.* (2014) found, choice of business for women is often based on their previous work experience. This minimises the risk of venturing into completely uncharted territory with a new enterprise. Working for a large organisation and engaging in corporate entrepreneurial behaviour, such as responding quickly to a change in market conditions, may also support the move into self-employment more generally (Bhide, 1986).

By remaining as marketers, one of the structural barriers to start-up, namely knowledge of the industry, is removed as expertise and skills are transferred (Brindley *et al.*, 2014; Mirchandani, 1999). The focus can then be on the other structural factors/processes that

support or inhibit new venture creation. If one reflects on marketing as a profession, communication, planning (tactical and strategic), relationship development and promotional skills are cornerstones of the profession and are thus transferable to self-employment and networking. Indeed, entrepreneurial marketing (EM) ‘...lies at the interface between a market orientation and an entrepreneurial orientation’ (Morris *et al.*, 2002, p.6) and is characterised by its network-relationship-creative perspective where customers and the entrepreneur act as co-creators of the business (Morrish, Miles and Deacon, 2010). Drawing upon Morris *et al.*’s (2002) seven dimensions of entrepreneurial marketing, networking in an SME context can help the organisation to leverage resources and by collaborating within their network, enable the SME to proactively manage an unpredictable external environment. Yet as O’Cass and Morrish (2016) suggest, our understanding of the marketing and entrepreneurship dynamic is still limited from a theoretical and empirical perspective. Added to the fact that knowledge of women’s entrepreneurial experiences represents “...a serious blind spot” (Cohoon *et al.*, 2010, p.1), further research that provides women’s own perspectives/experiences of networking in an entrepreneurial and marketing context is required. The aim of this study therefore is to explore how self-employed women in the marketing services sector build, use and value networks and support mechanisms over the lifetime of their business.

Methodology

Gartner (2010, p.12) argues that ‘narrative scholarship can best address issues in entrepreneurship that are concerned with entrepreneurial intentions and actions and their interrelationships with circumstances...’. For this reason, the study adopted a qualitative approach to data collection since it has an emphasis on investigating respondents’

interpretations whilst taking account of the research context (Bryman, 1989) and so enables the participants' social construction of reality to be explored (Neergaard *et al.*, 2005). Adopting a qualitative approach also provided an opportunity to explore the interface between how the women networked and the extent to which they drew upon their marketing skills and previous experience, whilst at the same time acknowledging the SME marketing context they operated in. In-depth interviews with 26 self-employed women based in three different areas of the UK were conducted: the Midlands (n=13), North West (n=7) and Wales (n=6). At this point, theoretical saturation was reached with no new themes emerging from the interview materials (Bowen, 2008). Purposive and snowball sampling were used to select participants (Bryman and Bell, 2015). The researchers used their personal and professional contacts to access suitable businesses in the first instance and then gained referrals to other interviewees from the participants. This led to the interviews being conducted in three areas of the UK, with the most carried out in the Midlands, where the researchers were based. Using snowball and purposive sampling ensured that the participants had the knowledge to respond to the questions (i.e. they were all female marketing SME owners) but also helped to overcome any reluctance by the SMEs to engage in research and academia, as reported in other studies (Short, Ketchen, Combs and Ireland, 2010). Snowball sampling, in particular, can be helpful in identifying hard-to-reach populations (Faugier and Sargeant, 1997). It was important to include businesses which varied according to which marketing services were provided, turnover and how long they had been established as this was likely to have an impact on the support mechanisms used. So, for example, the newest business had only been established four months and the oldest had been running for ten years. The highest annual turnover was reported to be £60k and the lowest between £5k and £10k. Services offered by the women in the sample were

varied and included market research (n=1), marketing communications (n=3), NPD (n=1), digital marketing (n=2), CRM (n=3) and marketing strategy (n=16). Two participants employed staff on a permanent basis and these were the oldest businesses in the sample. All the women had previously worked in corporate marketing roles for a minimum of ten years prior to becoming a self-employed marketer. The average age of the women interviewed was 38 years old. Table 1 provides a profile of the SMEs in the sample.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

All the interviews were conducted with the owner of the business and used a set of questions around *a priori* themes drawn from the literature. Each interview was 60-90 minutes and conducted in a convenient location to both the researcher and respondent. Participants were encouraged to tell their personal stories about managing and starting their business (Perren and Ram, 2004). Like the study by Neergaard *et al.* (2005, p.350), this approach enables an understanding of ‘...why and how the networking behaviour of a business owner changes over time...’. The interviews therefore attempted to capture the participants’ ‘voices’ by providing rich descriptions of the women’s experiences over their entire working life history to date (Atkinson, 2002). Themes explored in the interviews included the participant’s career history, their reasons for moving into self-employment, their experiences of running their business, their own professional experiences as a marketer and the support mechanisms they had used whilst being self-employed. All the interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically, using a system of coding called Template Analysis (King, 2004). The development of a list of codes (the ‘Template’) enabled the researchers to make sense of the large amounts of rich textual data

in a rigorous, structured manner (Waring and Wainwright, 2008). A coding 'template' was developed which highlighted broad themes and then more narrow themes important to the study. The generic themes were informed by the literature and research questions (for example, the importance of informal networks for women) and the specific themes emerged from the data (for example, the use of outsourcing to fulfil contracts). An extract of the coding is presented in Table 2.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

The 'Template' was then applied to all the interview transcripts to aid the interpretation of the data and included both *a priori* codes and codes generated inductively. The final themes developed from this analysis enabled explanatory model building. As a last stage in the analysis, the findings were presented to a selection of participants at a workshop for feedback. Respondent validation in the form of comments made by the women were then incorporated into the model building (Bloor, 1978).

Findings

The analysis revealed two main themes which reflected the study's research aim. Firstly, the types of support mechanisms with which the participants engaged in throughout the lifetime of the business and secondly, the value these support mechanisms presented to the business. Within each of these overarching themes further sub-themes emerged. Overall, all the women reported that they had engaged with several different formal and informal networks and support mechanisms over the lifetime of the business. All participants emphasised that the key to success was to be selective when choosing which networks and support mechanisms to engage with, whilst at the same time recognising that it took a

considerable amount of time for the business to benefit from involvement in the more formal networks. Hence, the nature of the networks the women were involved in had changed as the businesses had matured and their support requirements had altered. In all cases, the participants used networks and wider support mechanisms to promote their business. The following section provides a more detailed analysis of the support mechanisms used by the women and the perceived value of these networks:

Types of support mechanisms

Family and friends

Although not regarded as a 'network' by participants, family and friends were used by 14 of the participants to help support the start-up phase, both in terms of commercial opportunities and mentoring, as one woman reported *"When I set-up I had a number of clients who were friends who said 'we'd like you to do so many days'..."*. Similarly, another respondent stated that *"I do work for my husband's boss in marketing...so it tends to be a lot of people who know you in another context"*. Work for family and friends often led to operating in unfamiliar sectors but the participants viewed this as important work as they found it interesting and it enabled them to gain more experience. One participant working as a marketing strategy expert commented that *"I've done a lot of work recently with two friends...one has a pottery and the other one has a micro-brewery."* Opportunities generated through family and friends did not always lead to paid work but still enabled the business owner to broaden their expertise and enhance their reputation. In some cases, the women also had family or friends as unofficial mentors, supporting them in their decision-making. One woman reported that an ex-colleague had become her mentor and provided her with invaluable business advice, *"We meet every couple of weeks...so if I've got questions or you*

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2
3 know, concerns about things, I speak it over with him and he points me in the right direction.
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5 He's been very, very supportive."
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10 *Philanthropic and community based networks*

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12 Nine women had made a conscious decision to work on a volunteer basis for their local
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14 community whilst still managing their own business. They saw this as an opportunity to 'give
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16 something back' to society whilst making use of their business skills. Activities included
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18 sitting on charity boards, working on the parish council and organising local events. As one
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20 woman stated, *"For the last three years, we have a local arts and music festival that*
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22 *happens in the village where I live ... I've been doing the PR and marketing for it but also the*
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24 *fundraising and the sponsorship. I started to do it initially because I wanted to support the*
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26 *local community."* Similarly, another interviewee explained how she helped local charities, *"I*
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28 *do a bit of pro-bono work here and there when I come across a cause that interests me."* For
29
30 some, these altruistic activities had led to commercial opportunities, particularly once the
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32 business had been established. A respondent who had helped to promote for free an
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34 exhibition in her village said *"...I do their local promotion because all the local community*
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36 *members are all people that are fairly important....I do them some favours and I've had*
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38 *some work out of that"*. Another interviewee explained how being associated with charity
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40 work had helped her business, *"...we do give a certain amount of our time to do pro-bono*
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42 *work for some charity projects...potentially there's always a marketing opportunity there*
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44 *and having our name associated with certain charity projects has value to the business and*
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46 *kind of underlies our social values"*.
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57 *Previous employers*

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Previous corporate employers were a source of commercial opportunities for the participants, especially in the start-up phase. Describing her move into self-employment, one interviewee explained *"I bought a laptop and then went to talk to all the people that I'd worked with. And just sort of put feelers out with the people I knew from my career and went from there."* For twelve of the women, the fact that their previous employer was interested in outsourcing work to them, had provided the impetus they needed to start their business. One participant who had taken voluntary redundancy from her employer explained that *"I was going to try colleges, universities for some lecturing work...but I got approached by my former employer to do a report for them. And they didn't give me any more work but that led me on to thinking that's a possibility..."* Another interviewee explained how she could service clients who no longer wanted to work with her previous employer. She explained that this made her move into self-employment less risky *"...as soon as I told my clients I was leaving, they all followed me, I was very lucky. So it wasn't a big jump to set-up."*

Formal, government related support

Nearly all the participants (n=24) had engaged with formal, government related support during the start-up phase. This included, for example, organisations like Chambers of Commerce and regional government initiatives established to support SMEs in the area. However, for most participants these support mechanisms were not valued, given the membership costs and the quality of advice provided, which was increasingly diminishing because of UK public sector cuts. Some women also believed that female-owned businesses, were often overlooked by government support because they were regarded as small, lifestyle businesses and not worthy of attention. One woman who had support from a

government agency felt that it had *"...a reputation of mainly working with middle-aged white men"*.

Formal, non-government support

All participants had been involved in formal networks that were not government related. This included sector based networks some of which were women only, such as WIRE a not-for-profit organisation aimed to support rural business women, and generic organisations such as the Federation for Small Businesses. These networks were not only a source of new clients but also a mechanism for sourcing reliable suppliers to their business in the maturity phase. As one participant remarked, attendance at networking events enabled people to *"...buy off each other"* and could be mutually beneficial to the female business owner and the supplier, often another woman. Outsourcing work meant that they could take on larger contracts without employing staff and was a flexible approach favoured in the current economic climate, where clients were looking to complete projects within short timescales. It also meant the businesses could remain home-based, as recruiting a larger workforce did not require more office space. Outsourcing also enhanced the reputation of the business as the SME could appear larger than it was. Describing her preference for outsourcing work to other women, one participant said *"I do sometimes recruit in associates or partners to work on particular projects...and they're people I've bumped into and a lot of the time I will only work with other women. There's quite a good affinity there with the kind of work, costings, pricing and profitability..."*

Nonetheless, formal non-specialist networks were regarded as too intimidating for most of the participants in the start-up business phase, as one woman explained “...when I first started up, you could walk into a room and be the only woman. I’m a fairly confident person but even that fazes me, faced with a load of grey-suited men or people trying to sell me things”. Similarly, women only networks that lacked specialist business support, were not rated highly by the participants, as one interviewee explained “You go to the events and they’re talking about nail polish or what colour to wear...and I’m thinking I want to know about my tax return”. However, as the women became more experienced and their businesses more established, specialist, focused networks were sought, such as WIRE, since these were regarded as much more useful. The women therefore became more selective when choosing which formal networks to engage with. A more specialist network meant working with competitors to share experiences, as one interviewee explained “I think women in business tend to build their own networks together...I have three or four people who I can ring and say ‘I’ve had a dreadful day’...so I think women working on their own are very supportive of one another”. Involvement in these networks often led to guest speaking opportunities, which not only enhanced their credibility but also led to further work. The value of this activity was highlighted by one participant’s comments “I think my public speaking is probably one of our biggest marketing strategies” and similarly another woman who was asked how she marketed her business said “....mainly through networking, things like giving talks at appropriate places....where I think there might be a few appropriate people in the audience”.

Virtual networks

All the women used virtual networking such as LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook to generate business and enhance credibility. In the maturity phase, virtual networks were also used to source suppliers. The women explained how they had used social media as part of their networking activities, *"I use things like LinkedIn looking for contacts"*. One participant stated that social media was important for generating business because *"...the way that you get the paying customers is through recommendations on LinkedIn"* and similarly another interviewee explained that *"...we drive a lot of business through our website and we use social networking...things like Twitter and Facebook do help connect you with potential customers"*. Describing how online networking had helped her business in other ways, a different participant explained *"I'm using LinkedIn quite heavily and interestingly I hadn't realised a by-product of using the chat forums is that my website's moved up Google...and through LinkedIn I've also met up with ex-colleagues."*

In sum, female marketers were using a combination of support mechanisms throughout the lifetime of the business (Figure 1). Whilst the nature of the support did not appear to be static and lessened/increased in importance depending on the SME's activities (as denoted by the circular arrows on Figure 1), there were two distinct phases in terms of network usage: start-up and maturity. Networking was thus, an evolutionary process. Apart from virtual networks, the nature and type of support mechanisms altered when the credibility of the business became more established. Initially, the women were involved in formal networks that were open-to-all (B) but as the business matured the formal support became less reliant on government initiatives and more specialised and suited to the needs of the business (D). The informal support mechanisms were not regarded as 'networks' but were a source of commercial opportunities and as the business matured, the women felt able to

‘promote’ their business to the wider community (A & C). Previous employers outsourced work to the female business owner in the start-up phases (A) and in the established phases, the female owners outsourced work to others through their involvement in specialist networks (D). This suggests that the women benefitted from being on the receiving end of the outsourcing and through commissioning work to others. Outsourcing, for these women, was therefore a multi-directional phenomenon and closely linked to their networking activities.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Discussion

The aim of this paper was to explore the support mechanisms self-employed women providing marketing services use throughout the lifetime of their business and to establish the perceived value of these networks. The study has addressed a wider call for further research relating to ‘...how people acquire, build, use and benefit from networks...’ (Hanson and Blake, 2009, p.145) and the call for networking research to move away from cross-sectional studies of gender and networks (Foss, 2010; Klyver and Grant, 2010; Martinez and Aldrich, 2011). The model (Fig.1) developed in this paper goes someway to answering this call by not focussing solely on the start-up stage but by exploring the women’s use of networks throughout the lifetime of the business. It became evident that support came from two overarching sources - formal and informal. However, under these two broad categories, the women used several different mechanisms depending upon which stage in the process of setting up and managing their business they were in and in addition, the level of credibility of the business. This supports Martinez and Aldrich’s (2011, p.9) view which identified that ‘...[R]ather than confirming that one type of network connection is better than the other, the literature has pointed out the contingent nature of networks’ values’.

What is also interesting are the narratives the women used to describe their experiences. This is a key contribution of the paper in that the methodology has given voice to the women, thus 'acknowledging the significance of the personal reflections of entrepreneurs on their networking activities' (Foss 2010, p.89). There appears to be a semantics issue, in that the women did not describe family, friends and the community as networks, despite these offering some of the most valuable support to the women. Networks were seen as the formal, government related agencies, such as Chambers of Commerce. Further exploration of the women's narratives also finds that 'networking' is an amorphous, interchangeable term. Some of the smaller or sectoral networks are not described as such by the women but still fit with theoretical understandings of what a network constitutes (Birley, 1985; Gilmore, Carson, Cummins, O'Donnell and Gallagher, 2001b).

It is acknowledged that the findings support existing research on networks in new business creation, such as the use of family and friends in the initial phase of business development (Renzulli *et al.*, 2000; Alakaleek, 2014; Alsos, Carter and Ljunggren, 2014). What is salient is that as women who had previously worked in prominent corporate roles, they were not blind to how and what the networking opportunities were. Instead, it was a conscious choice to use kin/friends at the initial stage, particularly as this support was key to the home-based location of their business and their managing of multiple roles. As Greve and Salaff (2003, p.2) report '...contacts are often informal and non-work connections. These relations may extend across professional networks, reaching friends and colleagues from earlier jobs'. The findings also support the idea that family/ friends act as mentors (Terjessen and Sullivan, 2011). Mattis (2004) for example, found that 46% of SME owners in their study had a mentor or role model when starting out and were typically family (parents

or spouse). The study also supports the notion that useful networks take a while to develop and engagement with these alters as the business gains credibility (Greve and Salaff, 2003). Network theory discusses the length and durability of ties and how much effort must be put in to make involvement in the network beneficial. It highlights how ‘...each phase of establishing a business requires a different emphasis on networking’ (Ibid, p.16). Formal business support, for instance was, after the first taste, discarded by the women as they became disengaged from these networks because of their perceived male orientation. Indeed, Audet *et al.* (2007) proposed that the focus of agencies is often financial assistance and, as women do not always want financial capital, this support does not meet their needs. Similarly, Davidsson and Honig (2003) found that being a member of a business network (such as Chambers of Commerce) was the only type of industry association used more frequently by men. Furthermore, in the establishment phase according to Greve and Salaff (2003), networks are likely to contract. This study finds that women’s networks become more specialist as the business evolved, particularly for the long-established businesses but also, in contrast, that the women engage with new networks, such as the local community. This reflects Jack *et al.*’s (2010, p.333) observation that the networking process is ‘profoundly social’ but in this study, as well as being a way for women to navigate their conflicting roles and multiple identities (Warren, 2004), it was also a business decision. By regularly engaging with the community and other networks such as friends, previous employers and social media, the women used existing and new relationships to generate work. They adopted innovative approaches to customer acquisition which reflects a core component of entrepreneurial marketing, that is market orientation, and specifically ‘...customer equity, visceral relationships and an emotional dimension to the firm’s marketing efforts’ (Morris *et al.*, 2002, p.7).

Despite the support for existing research, this study makes several new theoretical, practical and methodological contributions as a result of researching atypical groups i.e. women and is sector specific. This issue of sector specificity answers methodological criticisms that entrepreneurship research is too heterogeneous and lacks consideration of minority owned SMEs. Indeed, previous networking research has identified the situational influence on networks (Brush, 1999), so by focussing on a particular sector (marketing services), one gender (women) and one size of business (micro/small) reduces the potential for variance in the findings. This methodological approach therefore addresses the call by Henry, Foss and Ahl (2016) who state that gender and entrepreneurship research should adopt ‘...sector, region and country explorations...’ (p.235) and ‘...more focused qualitative and innovative methodologies such as in-depth interviews, life histories, case studies, ethnography or discourse analysis...’ (p.236). What has emerged as new theoretical findings concern the dynamic fluidity of how the women use support mechanisms – a finding that was revealed as a result of employing a qualitative, narrative methodology and which is unlikely to have been discovered using a quantitative approach (Hill, McGowan and Drummond, 1999). The women were using different aspects of social capital to access support mechanisms and as Hanson and Blake (2009, p. 137) observe gender shapes ‘...patterns of social interaction, that is, with whom one interacts and the situations and processes of interaction’.

A further theoretical contribution of the paper concerns the start-up phase of the business and the use of outsourcing through the women’s networks. Here, women were often undertaking work from previous employers, which provided the essential working capital and entrance into the market. This links to the ‘corporate incubator’ idea proposed by

Moore and Buttner (1997) which highlights the importance of gaining business experience in large organisations before becoming self-employed. The women's foray into self-employment was not necessarily because of a soured employer-employee relationship but was based on trust and mutual benefit and value of their worth. The former employers were in effect outsourcing work to the women owned businesses because of varying economic and structural reasons. In a similar vein, findings by Terjessen and Sullivan (2011) also examined entrepreneurs who had made the transition into self-employment from organisational employment. They found that for female entrepreneurs, a relationship from their corporate employment had transferred into a 'mentor-protégé' relationship when they became self-employed and that this had led to new opportunities and work for the SME.

In this study, the outsourcing had a wider currency. At the beginning, the women were outsourced to, but as the business gained credibility, the participants provided opportunities for other women owned SMEs on an outsourcing basis. This in effect created a virtuous circle where the credibility of the businesses involved is enhanced i.e. the business that is providing the outsourcing opportunity and those asked to work on the project. Although entrepreneurs are often regarded as being individualistic and self-serving (Wagener, Gorgievskia and Rijsdijk, 2010) this outsourcing relationship would suggest that relationships over-ride competitive behaviour. So, whilst this study demonstrates that outsourcing is used by both large organisations and SMEs and this entrepreneurial behaviour is employed for similar reasons i.e. to achieve leaner operations and encourage flexibility and market responsiveness (Park, Lee and Morgan, 2011), the participants in this study approached outsourcing in a collaborative way, using potential competitors as partners. Indeed, this supports the findings by Jayawarna, Jones and Marlow (2015) who

found that female entrepreneurs compared to their male counterparts, adopted a more participative, conciliatory approach to managing. This also fits with Morris *et al.*'s (2002, p7-8) conceptualisation of entrepreneurial marketing, specifically the 'risk management' and 'risk leveraging' dimensions. They argue that collaboration with other firms can help to reduce risk and aid performance in SMEs because it enables resources '...to be quickly committed or withdrawn'. Resource leveraging and mitigating risk through outsourcing also enables '...other people's resources to accomplish the marketer's purpose'. As Drakopolou Dodd and Patra (2002, p.132) report '[E]xamining co-operation and alliance may offer us greater understanding than the concept of competition...'. The women in our sample are operating very similar businesses in terms of offer to market but are more than happy to work with other women that in other categorisations would be competitors. Like Jack *et al.* (2010, p.333) found, networks are effective where there is 'affinity, shared attitudes and trust...'. Indeed, how our women work together supports the work of Jones and Parry (2011) who found that networking with others in the same sector was important as it provided indirect business support. Collaborating with other women in their network to help fulfil contracts also echoes work by Orser and Elliott (2015, p. 19) who found that female entrepreneurs in their study engaged in 'entrepreneurial feminism'. Like the study presented here, their female participants provided opportunities to other women by sharing their power rather than competing for resources and so expressed '...feminist values through their enterprises'.

A further theoretical contribution concerns how these women used community engagement as a form of networking thus making a link between the locale and the female-owned business. This finding addresses the criticism that previous studies have not investigated the

degree of importance female entrepreneurs place on local networks and the spatial aspects of networking (Hanson and Blake, 2009). The participants engaged in various philanthropic activities which supported their businesses. This reflects the work of Martinez and Aldrich (2011, p.20) who argue that ‘Contacts created through voluntary associations...help owners overcome the limitations of their original more identity-based networks’. This finding also reinforces the observations made by Hills *et al.* (2008) which state that an important element of entrepreneurial marketing concerns opportunity recognition and this is facilitated through the entrepreneur’s constant and close engagement with the market – in this case the participants’ wider community involvement. The development of relationships with the community was not always seen as a business strategy but perceived as a mutually beneficial relationship because it enabled the women to ‘give something back to their community’. The reciprocal arrangements between the women and their locale thus supports the notion of ‘mindful entrepreneurial marketing’ where entrepreneurial marketing and social responsibility come together to achieve a successful marketing campaign which ‘...does right by the society....’ (Whalen, Uslay, Pascal, Omura, McAuley, Kasouf, Jones, Hultman, Hills, Hansen, Gilmore, Giglierano, Eggers and Deacon, 2015, p. 14).

Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, by capturing female self-employed marketers ‘voices’, this qualitative research has moved away from an ‘objectivist approach’ which has dominated women’s entrepreneurship research (Hughes, Jennings, Brush, Carter and Welter, 2012, p. 431) and surfaced the actual support mechanisms that have been utilised and valued by women marketers. This support helps to create and sustain their businesses in a way that capitalises on their professional and social experiences in innovative ways, such as multi-directional

outsourcing. The findings thus respond to Greve and Salaff's (2003, p.17) call '.... to learn more about the network composition of female and male entrepreneurs'. Moreover, the research has responded to a call for networking research that listens 'to entrepreneurs own stories' (Foss, 2010, p.97) and explorations of how networks are embedded in cultural discourses and structures (Hanson and Blake, 2009).

The theoretical contribution of this study is encapsulated in a new model (see Figure 1) which shows the key support mechanisms used by the women throughout the lifetime of their business. These support mechanisms demonstrate that the women are embedded in a network which consists of several heterogenous ties, all of which help to support the business by providing access to knowledge and resources that the business may be deficient in (Sullivan and Marvel, 2011). Even though the model is represented as a matrix, it is implicit that women can move between the four quadrants, as support is not a static process. The model therefore addresses Brush's (1992) suggestion that research should recognise that for self-employed women, their business, networks and their individual development are synergistically linked.

It is acknowledged that the model explores networks only at a particular point in time, is UK centric, sector specific and cannot determine when the transitions between the phases take place, which is a wider criticism of matrix models (Jobber, 2010). Future research into other feminised industries e.g. retailing or in other professions, where relationship building is not a professional attribute, would assess the generalisability of the model. Aspects of the model that warrant further work include the importance of social media as a support mechanism and whether there is a sectoral bias in this. Although the women had

developed their identity as marketers, they did not use the marketing professional body as a network, which in other professions, such as accountancy, may be more prevalent. They did however, draw upon their expertise gained from their previous corporate marketing roles. How relationships develop through the life-cycle of the business and the extent to which these may be a gendered aspect or part of the professional marketing skills set, therefore needs further consideration. In addition, the women's involvement in philanthropic activities requires exploration to determine whether community work is an actual opportunity or negatively impacting upon their work/life balance. Related to this, it would be of interest to explore in greater detail the extent to which pro bono work can help to develop networks. It would also be beneficial to understand the extent to which outsourcing to other women owned SMEs continues as a supportive mechanism as the assumption would be that this stops once the business has sufficient internal resources. However, women may not want this if it is indicative of a growth strategy involving employing staff and taking on larger premises (Constantinidis, Cornet and Asandel, 2006).

The study has several implications for practice. The research demonstrates that networking activity changes over the life-cycle of the participants' business. Self-employed women providing a marketing service, therefore, need to review and reflect upon the usefulness of their networking activity in line with the way their business evolves, ensuring it is continually 'fit for purpose' and does not detract from revenue generation. For those facilitating formal networks, such as Chambers of Commerce, the study suggests that women are unlikely to engage with formal, government support unless these organisations adopt a more inclusive approach, which provides more meaningful support to female-owned SMEs. Agencies like these therefore, need to be creative with their support, by moving away from the traditional,

male oriented views of entrepreneurship. Rather than providing support based on the notion that success equates to financial gains and rapid growth, the agencies could consider success from an alternative position such as the ability to achieve a favourable work-life balance. This then, might translate into different types of support initiatives. A voucher scheme, for example, would allow these women to access business advice pertinent to their particular needs and subsidised venues would enable these women to host their own networking events. Indeed, the findings of this study underscore the value these women placed on networking within their local community and their own self-generated communities of practice. Policymakers could therefore work more closely with the geographical and/or professional communities in which these women are located to provide a co-created notion of support, which considers the needs of the women owned SMEs in the context in which they operate. Interestingly, the women in this study did not make any reference to professional marketing bodies, such as the Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM) in the UK, as part of their networking activity. Whilst it is not clear why this was, it does suggest that there is a role to play for professional marketing organisations in supporting SMEs. Rather than focusing upon providing support for corporate marketing professionals, bodies like the CIM could provide more specialist support for marketers operating in the SME sector.

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